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Varieties of dissent

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- A scientist publishes a research paper questioning the dominant view on global warming.
- A minister gives a sermon suggesting the Holy Ghost is irrelevant to Christian belief.
- A company accountant meets with the boss to query the boss's favored tax write-off scheme.
- Protesters join rallies against corporate globalization.
- A doctor in China sends e-mails alleging corruption in the Communist Party.

Each of these might be considered a form of dissent. What they have in common is questioning or challenging a dominant belief system, dominant either via widespread acceptance or via the power of those in charge.

Dissent is both lauded and loathed. It is lauded when it is in the glorious, unthreatening past. Famous dissenters include Socrates, Galileo, and Martin Luther. Dissent is especially lauded when dissenters emerge victorious, such as the signers of the Declaration of Independence. It is also lauded when it is geographically distant. Aung San Suu Kyi, the charismatic leader of the opposition to Burma's repressive regime, is an example. But closer to home, dissent is less attractive - at least to those whose power or position is threatened by it.

Whistleblowers are individuals who speak out in the public interest. The classic whistleblower is a loyal, trusting employee who reports on a problem in the organization, such as corruption or a danger to the public, either internally or to outside audiences.

For their trouble, whistleblowers are routinely ostracized, threatened, harassed, reprimanded, referred to psychiatrists, demoted, dismissed, and blacklisted. They commonly suffer damage to their career and large financial losses; often their health and relationships suffer as well.

(In contrast to whistleblowers, leakers reveal information without identifying themselves. There are two main types of leakers. First are the politicians and senior officials who leak information to journalists as a means of manipulating public opinion. Second are the public-interest leakers, usually junior employees, who seek to expose wrongdoing. The second sort, when identified, are treated just like whistleblowers. When there's a furious investigation into the source of a leak, you can be sure it was a public interest issue.)

Whistleblowers usually suffer reprisals, but does that mean reprisals a *necessary* part of dissent? Dissent assumes a challenge to some system of power or belief - what can be called an establishment - but how the system responds to a challenge is, arguably, a separate matter.

Ten-year-old Brett tells his father Frank they shouldn't watch football on television like usual on Sunday - in fact they shouldn't watch sport on television ever again! Frank has several options. He can simply ignore young Brett, or laugh off his comment as a silly idea. Or he can earnestly explain the importance of Sunday football and give Brett guidance an understanding its subtleties. He might try to bribe Brett by offering to play with him outside afterwards, or by giving Brett some money.

If Frank is an authoritarian, he may punish Brett, perhaps with a beating. On the other hand, Frank might try to co-opt Brett's dissent by offering to make one day per year "No TV Day." Finally, it is possible Frank might capitulate to Brett's demand. Maybe he was under pressure to cut his TV watching and Brett's plaintive request was enough to tip the balance.

Frank's options are pretty much the same options every establishment has for responding to dissent: ignore it, communicate with and attempt to educate the dissenters, repress the challenge, incorporate the challenge and the challengers into the system, or capitulate. We tend to hear much more about the response of repression, but the other responses can and do occur. In 1989, when the ruling Communist parties in Eastern Europe were faced with escalating popular protest, most of them capitulated without a fight.

Disagreement, dissent, rebellion, and heresy

In analyzing challenges within professions, social scientist Paul Root Wolpe makes a useful distinction between dissent, rebellion,

and heresy. Suppose some medical researchers challenge the current knowledge about the cause of a disease but remain committed to conventional scientific methods for assessing the knowledge. Wolpe calls this *dissent*. An example is the idea that HIV does not cause AIDS. The idea that bacteria cause ulcers was dissent just a few decades ago, but has now become orthodoxy. In both cases the challengers were committed to conventional scientific methods.

A different sort of challenge is to the authority structure of the profession, such as women entering medical domains previously dominated by men or barefoot doctors carrying out procedures that professionals claim as their exclusive domain. Wolpe calls this *rebellion*.

Another category is *heresy*, which for Wolpe is a challenge to central values of the orthodoxy, including how claims should be evaluated. An example is homeopathy, in which very tiny doses of substances are used to treat diseases, with some doses so diluted that not one molecule of the active ingredient might be expected to remain, in apparent contradiction to pharmacological principles.

To this classification can be added *disagreement*, denoting a milder form of challenge than dissent. Disagreement might occur over which antidepressant drug is more effective. Dissent concerning antidepressants would be something deeper, such as questioning the value of drug treatment altogether - and providing clinical evidence to support this skepticism. If a new non-clinical group claimed the right to make interventions against depression, that would be rebellion. To claim depression does not exist would be heresy.

This classification can easily be transposed into other domains. In a business, questioning when to hold a sale would be a disagreement. Questioning a well-established policy on hiring would be dissent. Pushing for a maverick group of directors would be rebellion. Advocating pulling out of the main line of business or paying everyone an equal wage would be heresy.

When a disagreement - a mild challenge - succeeds, a typical outcome is a changed decision. For successful dissent, a typical outcome is a changed policy or practice - this can be called reform, because basic operating principles are unchanged. For a successful rebellion, a typical outcome is a new set of leaders and perhaps a new power structure. A successful heresy brings about an entirely different conception of what is going on - it is revolutionary, in that guiding principles are changed.

At the scale of national political systems, a disagreement might be over how to implement an agreed policy, for example a disagreement over which military helicopters to buy, or how

many. Dissent might be over something more fundamental, such as whether defense alliances should be changed. Rebellion might be over who controls defense decision-making, with a challenge made by civilians to take over from military figures, for example. A possible heresy would be to get rid of the army altogether, such as was put to the Swiss electorate in a referendum some years ago.

A military coup is a type of rebellion, as the label suggests: it changes the decision makers but does not necessarily change the system, at least if it was already authoritarian. More far-reaching is revolution, in which the operating principles of the political and economic system are dramatically altered: the French revolution introduced republicanism and the Russian revolution introduced state socialism. What was previously heresy became orthodoxy.

Revolutions usually involve a changing of the ruling group; in other words, successful heresies usually are linked to successful rebellions. But not always. Mao Zedong, as head of the Chinese Communist Party, launched the Cultural Revolution, with revolutionary changes in social relationships, in a way that cemented his own power.

The distinction between dissent, rebellion, and heresy can be useful at times, but there are continuities between them as well. Dissenters, in order to gain a hearing for their ideas, often band together and take concerted action, thereby becoming rebels, as in religious dissent that becomes the foundation for a new denomination. The reaction of powerholders can turn dissenters into heretics, as when defenders of religious orthodoxy excommunicate someone for actions that might otherwise be treated as a trivial difference. On the other side of the fence, rebels may latch onto a heretical doctrine as a way of fostering internal unity. So, for convenience, when I use the word dissent, it sometimes also covers rebellion and heresy.

Reasons

Given the likelihood of reprisals, why would anyone want to dissent? One reason is they didn't realize there would be reprisals. Many whistleblowers did not set out to challenge the organization. From their point of view, they were just doing their job, reporting a financial anomaly, pointing out the rules hadn't been followed, or putting in a grievance using the standard procedure. They were naive: they didn't realize the official rhetoric was not the actual way people were expected to behave. These inadvertent whistleblowers are particularly tragic. They suffer reprisals for doing their job according to the organization's espoused ideals and, as a result, their whole conception of the world is turned upside down.

Many dissenters, though, know exactly what they are doing: they know the risks but they proceed anyway. Why? Sometimes it is pure ambition and self-interest. In some fields of science, the surest way to fame is to challenge and overthrow the ruling paradigm. To be sure, some paradigm-busting scientists like Einstein conform to the gentle image of being interested only in ideas. But others are more calculating. James Watson, co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, revealed the ruthless side of research in his book *The Double Helix*.

There are some dissenters who are driven by malice, for example envy of those who have power and prestige. Before the 1917 Russian revolution, some anarchists presciently warned that Marxists seeking power in the name of the workers might become new oppressors. A writer named Max Nomad in the 1930s wrote a book titled *Rebels and Renegades* in which he attributed base motives to all manner of left-wing intellectuals and revolutionary leaders. One need not tar every left-wing figure with the same brush to recognize that some may be driven by self-interest. Of course the same could be said of the radical right.

Psychologist David Kipnis has carried out ingenious experiments supporting Lord Acton's famous aphorism that, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." For example, he showed that when powerful people used strong tactics to influence others, this made the powerholders believe that the others did not control their own behavior. This in turn led the powerholders to devalue those over whom they held power. To this we need only add that the *possibility* of having power can also be corrupting.

On the other hand, many dissenters seem to have no ambitions aside from bringing about a better world, whether in the family, the workplace, or the political system. Many altruists operate behind the scenes, taking risks without seeking glory. For example, during the 1968 massacre of Vietnamese civilians by U.S. troops at My Lai, a few U.S. soldiers intervened against the killings and reported their concerns to superiors, later suffering in their army careers as a consequence. Only decades later were their honorable actions widely recognized. And for each such dissenter who is eventually seen as a hero, there are many others who never receive public validation.

It's also possible for dissent to be a role learned through experience. Frank Sulloway in his path-breaking book *Born to Rebel* argues that first-born children are more likely to conform to their parents' career and beliefs because this is effective in winning their parents' attention, whereas later-born children - Charles Darwin is an example - often innovate to gain parental attention, and thus are more likely to become dissenters. In Sulloway's picture, dissent becomes an acquired behavior, almost a reflex action.

Rather than focus on dissenters and their reasons, it may be more illuminating to examine conformists. Psychiatrist Arthur Deikman argues that everyone as a child has the experience of being dependent and, as an adult, may long to return to a state of "oneness." This can lead to cult-like dynamics in which leaders are idolized - like parents - and hierarchy dominates over truth. Outsiders and opponents are devalued, with the conformist's own anger and resentment projected onto them. In Deikman's picture, suppression of dissent is the most characteristic feature of cult life. He argues that many conventional organizations, including businesses and governments, have cult-like features.

Methods

Dissent is most readily recognized in the form of words or symbols, such as speeches, petitions, slogans, pictures, films, clothes, and the like. Soviet dissidents typed their seditious thoughts and circulated the original and carbon copies for others to reproduce, creating a genre of dissident writing called *samizdat*.

But it's also possible to dissent through one's actions. Of course, all actions have communicative dimensions, but they need not be symbolic in obvious ways. Many of those who harbored Jews during the Nazi occupation of Europe did so at great risk and without any fanfare afterwards. They dissented from Nazi policies without any distinctive verbal or other symbolic accompaniment. Because dissent-through-action is less familiar, it's worth looking at it more closely.

If actions can constitute dissent, then why not violent actions - including terrorism? Indeed, insurgent (non-state) terrorism has been called, by scholars Alex Schmid and Janny de Graaf, communication activated and amplified by violence. Conceived as a communication strategy, terrorists are the senders, their victims are the message generators, the western mass media carry the message, and the public or the enemy are the receivers of the message.

If terrorism can be a method of dissent, then it definitely shows that dissent is not necessarily a good thing - it depends on how the dissent is carried out.

Another way of expressing dissent is via what is called nonviolent action. Pioneering nonviolence scholar Gene Sharp divides nonviolent action into three main types. The first is protest and persuasion, such as speeches, petitions, slogans, rallies, mock elections, prayer, and rude gestures. To count as nonviolent action, an action needs to be something beyond conventional politics: lobbying and voting do not count as nonviolent action because they are institutionalized and routine. Likewise, when a

method becomes conventional, such as petitions used to support increased hospital funding or designate a new public holiday, the challenge to dominant beliefs may be minimal. In an authoritarian society, though, a petition can be deeply subversive. What counts as nonviolent action depends on the context, and similarly for dissent.

The second main type of nonviolent action is noncooperation, which includes social ostracism, protest emigration, consumer boycotts, withdrawal of bank deposits, embargoes, judicial noncooperation, and a huge variety of strikes. Noncooperation can certainly be a way of expressing dissent.

The third main type of nonviolent action is intervention, which includes methods such as fasts, sit-ins, alternative media, and setting up alternative political institutions. These also can be forms of dissent. When members of a neighborhood join together to clean up a vacant lot, plant flowers and shrubs, and install outdoor furniture, they are engaging in nonviolent action and dissenting from conventional views about ownership and responsibility. Like many other dissenters, they and their efforts may well come under attack.

At the other end of the spectrum of methods is dissent through thought. A subversive thought need not manifest itself in any communication or action - the point is it *could*. That is why totalitarian governments and cults attempt to crush autonomous thinking, as George Orwell portrayed so frighteningly in *1984*.

More on methods

Often it is assumed that dissent is expressed in words, and furthermore as particular types of words: polite, rational, intellectual discourse. This is the way most writers about dissent - such as contributors to this book, including me - operate. But dissent in practice often goes beyond these stereotypes. Instead of being polite, rational, intellectual discourse, it can be rude, absurd, and action-oriented.

Civility, namely being polite according to the norms of a situation, is characteristic of much discourse, including dissent. It includes things like using moderate language, being respectful of opponents, and paying deference to cultural icons. We need only think of carefully crafted articles or eloquent talks expounding radical ideas. But there is another style: a talk filled with shouting and swearing or an article with strong language and **ALARMING *DEPARTURES*** *from* **civilized formatting !!!**

The civil style has advantages: it is less likely to polarize the situation and allows the reader or listener to concentrate on the content without the distraction of unconventionality. It is more

likely to fit into an ongoing dialogue. But at the same time, dissent in a civil style is far easier to ignore or to dismiss with spurious arguments. Rudeness and other convention violations break through business as usual and put a spotlight on dissent, though at the risk of diverting attention from substance to style and from dissent to the dissenter.

It is worth remembering that defenders of the status quo can be rude too. In fact, this can be their standard style, as in the case of bullying bosses or abusive radio talk-show hosts. This sometimes leads to the curious phenomenon of challengers behaving more politely and according to the ostensible norms of civility than those they are challenging. In some such circumstances, polite dissent can be highly effective, winning sympathy through a graceful style.

But polite behavior can easily be ignored, especially by media seeking conflict and drama. If orthodoxy is bound up in elaborate rituals to which dissenters have no easy access, then norm violations can be effective. Think of Martin Luther nailing his challenges to the church door.

Sometimes a movement benefits from a dual-track approach, with challengers on the outside using rude techniques to bring dissent to attention and allies on the inside calmly making a sensible case. For example, opposition to genetic engineering includes both direct activists who destroy crops and policy advisers who argue the case for organic farming.

Next consider rationality, which includes having a logical line of argument based on clear premises and appropriate use of evidence. Much dissent is couched in rational form, from detailed mathematical arguments that quantum theory is false to highly documented criminological arguments that longer sentences do not reduce the crime rate. In many cases, dissent is formulated more rigorously than orthodoxy, for example when establishment views are founded on unexamined premises. The scientific establishment mostly relegates paranormal phenomena - such as precognition and psychokinesis - to the fringe, not taking them seriously. In response to claims about weaknesses in their evidence and research methods, parapsychologists have developed research protocols, such as double blinding, far more rigorous than those used in most research in physics and other conventional scientific disciplines.

The alternative to rationality can be called absurdity, which includes paradox and humor. Strategic uses of absurdity can sometimes trigger a change in perspective in a more profound and rapid way than rationality.

Consider the elaborate strategic justifications for nuclear weapons based on deterrence theory. Gwynne Dyer once wrote a

newspaper column pointing out that if having nuclear weapons was helping to prevent nuclear war through deterrence, then how much better it would be if more countries had nuclear weapons - indeed if every town had some. This satirical challenge exposed an unexamined double standard underlying deterrence theory: it was good for our side to have nuclear weapons but not for others.

There is a long tradition of humor used for dissent. The court jester was allowed to express home truths to the sovereign that were impermissible for others to voice. Today, cartoonists can question policy in more profound ways than normally expressed in print: Garry Trudeau arguably is far more biting than any conventional columnist.

Intellectuals are very good at developing rationales for any action they care to defend. Indeed, most people are quite competent at this. Evidence from brain imaging reveals that people make decisions slightly before their conscious minds prepare rational explanations. If subjects are presented with an unexpected object in a room, they will come up with a plausible reason for why it is there. The entire status quo benefits from an assumption of rationality: if this is the way things are done, people assume there must be a good reason for doing it, and come up with plausible explanations. If someone is arrested, many people assume the arrested person must have done something wrong.

Yet many customs have lost any rationale they might once have had. There is no obvious rational case for putting the fork on the left side of the plate; it is simply a convention. Putting the fork on the right could be a form of dissent - or eating with fingers, as is conventional in some cultures. Similarly, business meetings, financial statements, news broadcasts and much else operate according to convention, often with little rational backing. Humor and absurdity can be used to expose and challenge such conventions, such as the weather forecast, instead of being read by a newscaster, being sung by a choir.

Finally, return to the assumption that dissent is intellectual, expressed in words. As discussed previously, dissent can also be expressed through action, including violence as well as nonviolent methods such as rallies, strikes, boycotts, and sit-ins.

The more drastic or confrontational measures are not necessarily more effective. Blowing the whistle polarizes the situation; it might be better to work quietly on the inside. Likewise, violence, even in support of a good cause, can be counterproductive, because people react against the violence itself, especially when it is used against those seen as innocent or defenseless. Using violence reduces the moral advantage of the attacker, which is why terrorism alienates observers. It is far better for dissenters to be the ones attacked. Think of the Indian protesters in 1930 being brutally beaten at the behest of the British colonial rulers, as

portrayed in the film *Gandhi*, an event that galvanized support for Indian independence with India and internationally. In practical terms, nonviolent action often can be more effective than violence, even against ruthless rulers. So it is best to be wary about any generalizations about the effectiveness of tactics of dissent. Sometimes rational, civil discourse works best. Sometimes absurd and rude direct action is more effective.

Arenas

Dissent can occur in the most private and confidential circumstances and in huge, public arenas. Consider the accountant who queries the boss's tax write-off scheme. She could arrange a private meeting to discuss the issue. Or she could send a letter or a report just for the boss. A slightly more open method would be to send a circular to a select group pointing out that certain types of tax write-offs raise difficulties. This wouldn't single out the boss but at the same time might alert others to possible irregularities in the boss's approach.

Another option is to report the matter to the company auditor, to the boss's boss, or to someone else who might take action. Taking the matter to an outside body, such as a government audit department, is yet another option. These options restrict the number of people who know about the matter but differ in exactly who is told about it.

A different approach is to raise the matter with larger numbers of people. One possibility is to raise it at a staff meeting. Another is to circulate a report on a company e-mail list. Yet another is to give information to the media or to set up a website and alert a wide range of e-mail recipients.

These examples show there can be a huge variety of arenas through which dissent can be expressed. In many cases, private arenas are safer, but not always.

Many people believe organizational dissenters should start internally and try all possible internal channels before going public. That is exactly the path pursued by many of those who end up being called whistleblowers. They begin with an informal report to a colleague or the boss. When that doesn't work, they might go to a higher boss or to members of the governing board. Often by this time reprisals have begun, becoming an additional source of grievance, with relief sought through internal grievance procedures. When none of these provide any satisfaction - the most common experience - then it's time to approach outside bodies such as government audit departments, regulatory agencies, ombudsmen, anti-corruption bodies, courts, and the like. The experience of whistleblowers - as shown in research by William De Maria - reveals these are very unlikely to provide any

relief. So eventually, often years down the track, the whistleblower decides to go public. Despair over the failure of official channels drives the whistleblower to seek media attention.

This route makes sense if expressing dissent privately is actually effective. Suppose the boss said, "You're right, these tax write-offs I've been recommending are inappropriate. I'll immediately rectify the accounts and set up a procedure to make sure nobody - including me - is in any doubt about what's right and proper." Mission accomplished: the accountant might leave feeling things have been fixed and not even imagine dissent was involved. How often does this happen? No one really knows, because we seldom hear about these cases where private communication promptly leads to a resolution of concerns.

It is safe to say such an ideal outcome is unlikely when something longstanding and deep is involved. If the boss has been fudging the books for years, the accountant is likely to become an immediate target for reprisals, while the boss hides or destroys the evidence. If the accountant pursues internal and external appeal processes, they are unlikely to provide any relief.

In such situations, it is more effective to go public as soon as possible - or at least as soon as unimpeachable evidence is available. Going public sometimes can be safer too, because reprisals then become more obvious. The accountant is likely to lose her job whatever she does, but by going public there's a better chance a corrupt boss will be shamed and forced to resign, with vindication for the accountant.

In choosing an arena to express dissent, it's vital to think both of likely opponents and likely supporters. A private meeting sounds good in principle, but will fail if the boss responds by mounting an attack. What's missing in the private meeting is any way to increase support. Public forms of dissent can serve to mobilize greater support, by making both the dissent and any reprisals known to potential allies.

Salman Rushdie in his novel *Satanic Verses* mounted a very public satirical attack on Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa was a very public reprisal, which triggered widespread support for Rushdie and his freedom of speech. Should Rushdie have first taken his criticisms to the Ayatollah privately?

Tactics

The choice of arenas is one facet of what can be called the tactics of dissent. This includes both the actions by dissenters and by establishments. Their engagement can be called the "dance of dissent."

Dissenters can choose how to begin the dance. They choose the

dance floor, namely the arena. And they choose the dance style, namely how to express their dissent. This can be through subtle comments, through humor, through a factual presentation, or through a bold and abusive declaration. They can choose words or actions or both.

As mentioned earlier, establishments can respond in a variety of ways. They can ignore it, refusing to dance. They can communicate with the dissenter, joining the dance but attempting to convince their partner to retire from the floor. They can attempt to repress the challenge, turning the dance into a duel. They can divert the dissenter through tortuous formal procedures, pretending to dance while sabotaging the steps. They can incorporate the challenge, making the dance part of the establishment's ritual. Or they can capitulate, leaving the dissenters to run the dance hall.

Rationales

Another person's dissent can be annoying, distracting, time consuming, and wasteful. So why put up with it? Isn't it better to get on with the job?

If a group, before taking action, waited until everyone agreed, then it might never get anything done. At some point, disagreement must be set aside or overridden, or the group disbanded. That much is obvious. The key questions are about the appropriate point at which this occurs and what should be done about disagreement in the meantime.

In armies, dissent can be treated as insubordination and severely punished. On the front lines, refusal to fight is considered treason and sometimes penalized by execution. At stake is military success or even survival. Yet even in this life-and-death situation, there is potential value in dissent. Soldiers' rebellions may signal that a war is unwinnable or immoral.

Dissenters can be likened to a body's warning systems. Pain is not pleasant but it is valuable if it prevents a damaging action or draws attention to a serious problem. If pain persists, it may indicate disease. The body is designed so action can be taken despite pain, but it is usually unwise to ignore pain altogether. Any person whose pain receptors are deadened is at grave risk because injury can occur and be aggravated without awareness. Except in rare circumstances, it is unwise to cut off your hand if it is causing severe pain.

Dissenters at times do seem to be a pain in the body politic. A more positive analogy is to say they are like the body's sense of equilibrium, without which a person might fall over. The basic idea here is that dissent can be a valuable form of feedback to a

group. It alerts the group to potential down sides of actions, highlights unexplored options, and discourages short-sighted decision making. According to this line of thinking, dissenters should be encouraged, not castigated, and certainly not cut off entirely like the painful hand. What's the problem?

What dissenters are up against is a strong social pressure for conformity, which also can have survival value. If a tribe needs all its members to work together to find food, then often it is safer to cast out anyone who threatens the group's unity - or even to cast someone out in a scapegoating ritual in order to *create* unity. Remaining unified can be more important than getting decisions exactly right.

Whatever conclusions are reached about the dynamics of early human societies, it is certainly true that pressures for conformity continue to exist. The key issue today concerns the level of group cohesion that is necessary or desirable. There are well-known dangers of corruption and oppression. The scale of contemporary societies is far greater than anything experienced in human prehistory and likewise the scale of potential and actual corruption and dysfunction is extraordinary. Consequently, it can be argued the need for dissent is greater than ever.

It might seem dissent is safe enough when free speech is protected as a legal right, but this is to confuse law and practical reality. "Free speech" is the rhetoric but in reality it is hemmed in by all sorts of restrictions. In particular, free speech protections do not apply in workplaces. Deena Weinstein argues that bureaucracies - including corporations - are analogous to authoritarian states, with no rights to form opposition movements or to elect leaders. So although free speech and dissent are lauded in the abstract, in practice they are the object of continuing struggles.

The value of dissent to society is recognized through the respect paid to the principles of free speech, free assembly and the like. These can be seen as ways societies have set up early warning systems, to better prepare themselves for changing circumstances. Suppressing dissent can be efficient when the task is simple, unambiguous, and unchanging, and all hands are needed to tackle it. But when tasks are complex and changing, it is more efficient to harness a variety of points of view. Dissent helps make society flexible.

It is often noted that society is becoming more complex and rapidly changing, through processes including globalization, mass education, technological innovation, diversified communication systems, and the quest for personal self-development. In such a turbulent social environment, suppression of dissent becomes ever more dysfunctional. Organizations and entire societies that are able to harness the insights and energy from dissent can better adapt to unpredictable, ongoing changes. Indeed, there is a case

for maximizing flexibility by encouraging or even manufacturing dissent. At the small group level this is the familiar role of the devil's advocate; at the organization level it is the role of "Team B," set up to challenge the dominant perspective represented as "Team A." However, there is a long way to go before corporate or government leaders decide to promote greater external scrutiny by funding grassroots opposition groups.

Conclusion

The concept of dissent covers a wide range of phenomena, from the intimate to the global and from the subtle to the bombastic. It's possible to restrict the domain of dissent somewhat by distinguishing it from disagreement, rebellion, and heresy, but even so its domain is enormous. Dissent can be in the form of thought alone or appear as the arching of an eyebrow, or can be manifest in major protest actions. It can challenge the views or edicts of parents, teachers, peers, experts, bosses, national leaders, church leaders, or scientific elites. It usually involves a challenge to a dominant view by the less powerful, but occasionally a leader is a dissenter against a pervasive way of doing things. Dissenters can be motivated by altruism, rationality, self-interest, or a host of other possibilities.

Dissent is often risky. Some types of dissenters, such as whistleblowers, regularly suffer reprisals. Some dissent passes unnoticed. A few dissenters receive plaudits immediately; others are only recognized years, decades, or centuries later. Yet others, probably the majority, are never vindicated and are judged as misguided by both peers and historians.

So is dissent worth having? A society in which all dissent was ruthlessly eliminated would only survive with an omniscient leader. Some level of dissent is necessary to keep an individual, organization, or entire society flexible and able to handle change. But how much dissent is needed? And what is the best way to separate useful from damaging dissent?

No one has come up with a persuasive answer to these questions. The most common approach is to try to pick winners, namely to decide which dissent is worthwhile and which is foolish. The trouble with this is no one knows for sure which crazy alternative today will be widely accepted as a sensible course later. Attempting to pick winning dissenters is usually a prescription for a low tolerance for dissent.

To ensure there is a reasonable amount of useful dissent, it is more reliable to protect *all* dissent, for example through robust defenses of free speech. This means for every vindication of a crazy idea, there are scores of dissenters whose claims are never accepted. That is the cost of being open to challenge.

Too little dissent is a risk, but so is too much. If no one can agree on even a few basics, then nothing gets done, as in a participatory conference in which the entire time is spent arguing over the agenda. What is the optimum level of dissent? This could be debated at length. My own view is that in many circumstances - such as authoritarian governments, bureaucratic organizations, and conformist peer groups - there is a need for more dissent, or rather for more tolerance for dissenters and dissenting ideas. Even dissent that is wrong can be valuable by triggering an examination that leads to improvement.

It is all very well to say more tolerance for dissent is needed. The key question is how to bring this about. Laws protecting free speech or whistleblowers have limited utility because what really counts are attitudes and behaviors. Changing those is more difficult than passing a law.

Perhaps more valuable than protecting dissenters through formal processes such as laws is developing better skills in expressing and responding to dissent. Anyone who wants to challenge a dominant viewpoint needs not only powerful evidence and arguments but also skills in expression, negotiation, group dynamics, direct action, and self-understanding. In other words, challengers need skills in how to mount an effective challenge. These are not usually taught in families, schools, or workplaces!

Just as important are skills for those confronted by dissent. Not everyone is able to separate the message from the messenger, or to tolerate foolishness while trusting that a few pearls of wisdom will occasionally surface. In all too many cases, managers react to dissent as if it is a personal attack - and sometimes it is, too. The temptation to counterattack can be overwhelming, especially for those with a lot of power. There are many skills to be learned in listening and in creating a climate in which dissent is accepted and harnessed for the greater good. But a training course to learn these skills is yet to be developed.

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